DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 584 CS 215 592

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TITLE America Inc.: John Dos Passos' "USA" as Professional Writing Textbook.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Communication; *Content Area Writing; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; Literary History; *Literature Appreciation; Technical Writing; United States Literature; Writing Assignments
IDENTIFIERS *Dos Passos (John); *Professional Writing; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

While working as a special consultant for General Mills in 1948, John Dos Passos wrote a report explaining the latest scientific research and technological advancements and how the postwar economy was affecting General Mills and the cereal market. General Mills, using a real writer for a corporate freelance, profited from Dos Passos' expertise and reputation. His "USA" trilogy was a blend of fiction, Forbes-style reportage, and economic analysis. As a history of American business from 1870 to 1935, "USA" is as exhaustive as it is colorful. For an instructor who uses it in a professional writing class, "USA" is an ideal primer for work-related writing. It can be read as an epic of early corporate communications, with its lessons divided between the practical and the promotional, and these business parables often translate into imaginative and effective writing exercises. Dos Passos becomes a model for resume composition with concrete specific words, factual details, and a strong narrative. Lessons in promotional writing concentrate on issues of audience and rhetoric. On the eve of the 21st century, when computers and electronic mail have made work-related writing more essential, challenging, and creative than ever, "USA" is still an important resource. (CR)

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AMERICA INC.:

John Dos Passos' *USA* as Professional Writing Textbook

ED 402 584

During the spring and summer of 1948, John Dos Passos worked as a special consultant for General Mills. The company had hired Dos Passos to inspect its main plants and regional offices in the corn and wheat belt so he could prepare a corporate report and a series of articles for *Modern Millwheel*, the company organ. Dos Passos' report was to analyze productivity and morale and make concrete recommendations while his articles would document for stockholders and the general public how General Mills products "evolved from fields to mills to grocery shelves" (Carr 475). In addition, Dos Passos was to explain the latest scientific research and technological advancements in agriculture and how the postwar economy was affecting General Mills and the cereal market. Dos Passos passionately threw himself into the assignment. Recovering from the tragic death of his first wife, Katherine Smith, he badly needed the money and diversion. Besides, hadn't Frank Norris shown in "A Deal in Wheat" that one could write a good story about the production, distribution, and consumption of cereal? For three months, Dos Passos toured offices and plants in Chicago, Minneapolis, Duluth, and Atlanta, took a crash course on the science of grains, and studied back issues of *Modern Millwheel*; then holed up for a week in a Fifth Avenue hotel, typing 12 to 16 hours a day to meet the final deadline.

Everyone gained from having Dos Passos work as a consultant. Dos Passos benefitted personally and artistically. His research assistant, Betty Holdridge, became his second wife, and his agricultural work was recycled 12 years later in "The Green Revolution," the third section of his last novel, *Century's Ebb*. General Mills, for its part, benefitted from Dos Passos'

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expertise and reputation. This project marked the first time an established American novelist had worked as a corporate freelance, and General Mills capitalized on the publicity. Dos Passos, the Public Relations Office declared, had been the only writer for the job. His famous *USA* trilogy, a blend of fiction, *Forbes*-style reportage, and economic analysis, had demonstrated to the company that Dos Passos possessed the acumen for effective work-related writing. Hemingway would have just shot someone.

I, too, have benefitted from John Dos Passos' expertise. For the past eight years, his *USA* trilogy has been an important resource in my Professional Writing class. Less a finished novel than a working portfolio of ads, press releases, *Wall Street Journal* articles, company newsletters, and business and technical writing, *USA* is an ideal primer for work-related writing. The trilogy teaches Professional Writing students two important things: a detailed history of American capitalism from the Gilded Age to the Great Depression and practically every business form necessary to find and keep a job. As we shall see, Dos Passos' observations about the rewards and hazards of mastering the rhetoric of the office and the market are still remarkably relevant after 60 years.

As a history book of American business, from 1870 to 1935, *USA* is as exhaustive as it is colorful. Dos Passos documents and analyzes the crimes of robber barons like Andrew Carnegie and Minor Keith; the achievements of such inventors as Edison, Ford, and the Wright Brothers; John D. Rockefeller and the Ludlow Massacre; Frederick Taylor and scientific management; the economic theories of Thorstein Veblen, which lie behind the book's critique of the American system; the rise of modern advertising, public relations, and mass marketing;

even, through the story of Charlie Anderson, the birth of commercial air travel. No other American novel deals more directly or more concretely with the tragic contradictions and creative tensions of democratic capitalism, and to his credit, Dos Passos presents both the perversity and the promise of American enterprise. Contrary to popular opinion, *USA* is a debate about, not a wholesale indictment of, the American market. That complexity reflects Dos Passos' own paradoxical background. Although he had passionate leftist sympathies, Dos Passos also was the son of the most famous and influential corporate lawyer of the early 20th century, from whom he learned the intimate workings of companies and trusts as well as the complicated dynamics of Wall Street. If Dos Passos hated scoundrels like J.P. Morgan, he completely admired enlightened capitalists like George Eastman.

USA's forensic quality invites students of all political persuasions to question their assumptions and dialogue with each other about the role companies and organizations play in their lives. More important, though, the trilogy also preaches the need for institutional integrity and effective work-related writing---two lessons all Corporate Communications majors need to learn. Dos Passos seems to condemn corporate culture while instructing his readers on how to improve it. This apparent contradiction becomes understandable when we examine the genesis of *USA*. Although the trilogy was initially inspired by the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, the work actually took shape in Dos Passos' mind some two years later, when he shared a train compartment on the Trans-Siberian Railroad with Ivy Lee, the father of American public relations. Both men were in Russia on business, and for days they discussed corporate law, the Coolidge boom, and the impact of Big Business and the mass media on American culture and politics. Their mutual passion for history and language must have made for a lively and

fascinating conversation. During the course of this verbal marathon, Lee probably stated his classic formula on Corporate Communications: "Tell the truth, because sooner or later the public will find out anyway. And if the public doesn't like what [your company is] doing, change your policies and bring them into line with what the people want" (qtd. in Hiebert 4-5). Corporations can achieve this goal through clear, concise, audience-centered writing---both effective internal documentation and creative public promotion and education.

Listening to this jowly preacher's son with the bunsen burner blue eyes, Dos Passos must have nursed mixed feelings. On the one hand, Lee was the man who had redeemed Rockefeller's image after the Ludlow Massacre of 1914. On the other hand, Lee was the man who rarely kept unflattering facts about a client from the press, who consistently advised companies to adopt public policies that went against their personal interests and business profits, who once declared to a group of electric railway executives: "If [a corporation] cannot trust the people, I'm afraid we must reconsider the question of democratic government. Unless we can trust the people, democratic government is in danger, and I, for one, am not prepared to admit that is true" (qtd. in Hiebert 12). Clearly, the two men were more alike than different, and their conversation left Dos Passos with a grudging respect, a creative ambivalence that are reflected in *USA*. Although Dos Passos caricatures Lee in the figure of J. Ward Moorehouse, Lee's ideas about honest and effective work-related writing shape the trilogy's episodes and themes, especially Dos Passos' belief, as he stated in his next trilogy, *District of Columbia*, that "free institutions" can be maintained only through "ethical vigilance" and "syntactical integrity" (*DC* 342). In fact, the role of language in an institutional setting, whether private corporation, public

public charity, government bureaucracy, or scientific institute, would become the main subject of Dos Passos' fiction.

USA, then, can be read as an epic of early Corporate Communications. Most of the trilogy's fictional characters---Janey Williams, Dick Savage, J. Ward Moorehouse---are young white collar professionals who make their living with words: secretaries, lobbyists, public relations agents, technical writers, copywriters. Significantly, even those characters who represent labor---Mac, Mary French, Ben Compson; respectively, printers, pamphleteers, propagandists---primarily work with language and layout. Since writing is *USA*'s central activity, Dos Passos often depicts his characters drafting memos, cover letters, site inspection reports, and press releases. More important, he shows the impact of work-related language on their public and private lives. Dos Passos contrasts these fictional stories of young Professional Writers with Horatio Algeresque biographies of actual inventors, entrepreneurs, and captains of industry, who succeed or fail depending on their ability to communicate in the marketplace. Dos Passos' juxtapositions are often ironic and instructive, and practical lessons about audience, purpose, method, and style permeate the text. Dos Passos tends to divide his lessons between the practical and the promotional. As we shall see, these business parables often translate into imaginative and effective writing exercises.

Dos Passos' practical lessons focus on the kind of writing young professionals must master to find and keep a job. Take something as basic as writing a resumé. Dos Passos knew firsthand that writers must do more than simply list their skills in a resumé; they must create a comprehensive---and comprehensible---persona for themselves on paper. Talent and experience

are useless without the fiction of a professional self with a clear objective and a discernible career path. Dos Passos illustrates this point in his biography of journalist, war hero, and diplomat, Paxton Hibben, for whom Dos Passos worked in the Office of Near East Relief from 1921 to 1922. Appropriately titled "A Hoosier Quixote," Dos Passos' account of Hibben's self-destructive career reads like the tragedy of a sloppy resumé. In fact, Dos Passos' narrative alternates between Hibben's actual resumé copy and the facts of his life. How, Dos Passos asks, could a Renaissance man like Paxton Hibben become unemployable? Most of the blame lies with the American system: Hibben was blackballed after being photographed laying a wreath on Jack Reed's grave. Part of the blame, however, lies with Hibben himself, "a slightly built truculent man, . . . too reckless ever to lay down the careful steppingstones of a respectable career," at least, on paper (*NN* 157). His cluttered, disorganized, sketchy resumé gives the impression of fecklessness, not brilliance.

During our own resumé workshop, I ask the class to perform triage on Hibben's vita. Evaluating his career, my students usually conclude that Hibben should compose separate resumés for at least four possible careers: journalism, academia, agency work, and political communications. Depending on his audience and his objective, Hibben should highlight certain skills and positions while downplaying and omitting others. He should then detail his experience using bulleted telegraphic body copy or succinct paragraphs with strong verbal phrases. These techniques would make each resumé impressive and legible. Using Dos Passos as a model, my students then turn to their own resumés. As a homework assignment, I ask them to create a diptych of documents. The first document is a polished copy of their resumé; the second, an annotation of one small section of that resumé. Students reproduce the body copy of a specific

job, centered and single-spaced, at the top of the second page, then write a one- or two-paragraph anecdote, double-spaced, summarizing what really happened at that job. This exercise serves many purposes. Besides introducing students to the basics of layout and design, it teaches them the importance of writing succinctly about themselves. As Richard Nelson Bolles states in *What Color is Your Parachute?*, prospective employers increasingly require an autobiographical blurb with a resumé or application. Bolles recommends these blurbs follow a four-part schema that discusses a task, the tools or means to accomplish it, the outcome, and the quantifiable results. Concrete specific words, factual details, and a strong narrative, Bolles argues, get the best results. Dos Passos' business bios, sometimes less than a page long, follow the same formula and make excellent models.

Dos Passos' lessons in promotional writing concentrate on issues of audience and rhetoric. Sometimes his examples focus primarily on internal communications, as in his review of Charles Proteus Steinmetz's career at General Electric. Though only two pages long, the story "Proteus" presents instructive examples of technical writing, customer and public relations, and interoffice communication, then contrasts their different styles. To be an effective writer in a large organization, Dos Passos implies, one must be able to communicate in all these different ways. For all his genius, Steinmetz could not. A German immigrant who had taught himself impeccable English, Steinmetz was a brilliant technical writer who could make "the law of hysteresis," the basis of alternate current, accessible to a lay audience (*FSP* 291). But he was rhetorically naive, maintaining the same guileless, avuncular tone throughout his business correspondence---whether he was presenting a report to a superior, sending a meat loaf recipe to a Schenectady housewife, or offering his services to Lenin. Steinmetz also struggled with

American idioms, and, since he believed words like numbers should have a single meaning, he could never understand the doublespeak of management and promotions. To prove this point, I supplement Dos Passos with copies of memos and business letters to and from Steinmetz as well as articles from GE's in-house magazine, *The Monogram*. This intertextual approach illustrates the difficulties of writing to an ESL audience and how miscommunication contributed to Steinmetz's exploitation at General Electric.

Audience, of course, is an even more important question in external promotions. According to Dos Passos, Luther Burbank's failure to understand his audience ended in catastrophe. At the height of his fame and popularity, Burbank the Plant Wizard, the man who created "a good firm shipper's fruit suitable for canning" and a miraculous garden of "hybrid" flowers, admitted during an interview that he was an atheist (*FSP* 74). The backlash from the Bible Belt was so violent that it damaged Burbank's enterprise and hastened his death. Once again I supplement Dos Passos with advertising and catalog copy for Burbank garden products, plus press releases and newspaper clippings about the controversy. If you were working for Burbank, I ask my students, what would you do to repair his credibility among Fundamentalists? Shrewdly, they advocate reconciling some of Burbank's achievements and ideas with the religious values of this particular audience. Advertising slogans for Burbank products should echo such Biblical passages as "Consider the lily of the fields" and "I have a garden in Ephraim." Research should develop a new hybrid, the Rose of Sharon. Above all, promotions should educate the public that Burbank's true predecessor in botanical genetic experimentation was not an infidel like Darwin, Huxley, or Spencer but a German Augustan monk, Gregor

Mendel, whose scientific notebooks contain fragments of prayers. These could be quoted in promotional materials sent to the Bible Belt.

Time prevents me from sharing more exercises with you. Let me briefly say, though, that Dos Passos' Newsreel collages can teach students how to summarize, analyze, and synthesize information from periodicals, a necessary skill for those preparing abstracts for office superiors; that his business profiles provide good models for fledgling writers who will someday prepare promotional bios of company leaders for newsletters or annual reports; that the way his fictional characters consciously model themselves after real-life *Fortune 500* celebrities, studying their background, manners, and beliefs, the public personas they have cultivated and the values they have stamped on their companies, can show young job applicants how to tailor a cover letter to a prospective employer---and how to beware of sycophancy and conformity.

Because of his concern for young American professionals, particularly with their struggle to communicate ethically within institutions, I think John Dos Passos would have been pleased to see *USA* used as a Professional Writing textbook. He firmly believed literature should be instructive and pragmatic, functional equipment for intelligent living. According to Arthur Mizener, Dos Passos considered his trilogy "an American invention . . . peculiar to the opportunity and stress of [the American market]," "the greatest possible homage to art as a new kind of 'practicality' in getting down to the facts of human existence in [the 20th] century" (ix). On the eve of the 21st century, when computers and E-mail have made work-related writing more essential, challenging, and creative than ever, *USA* is still an important resource. A precursor of hypertext, Dos Passos' fiction demonstrates that writing may be the one transferable skill that can adapt to any market.

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